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63D CONGRESS,
2d Session.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

REPORT
No. 232.

ILLITERACY AMONG ADULT POPULATION.

FEBRUARY 7, 1914.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union and ordered to be printed.

Mr. TOWNER, from the Committee on Education, submitted the following

REPORT.

[To accompany H. R. 2494.]

The Committee on Education, to whom was referred H. R. 2494, have considered the same and submit the following report with the unanimous recommendation of the committee that the bill be passed.

In the act fixing the scope of the work of the Bureau of Education the authority is given "to collect statistics and facts showing the condition and progress of education in the several States and Territories, and to diffuse such information," etc. It will be noted the powers granted are very limited.

The bill upon which we report (H. R. 2494) is as follows:

[H. R. 2494, Sixty-third Congress, first session.]

A BILL To investigate illiteracy among the adult population of the United States and the means of eliminating or reducing the same.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Commissioner of Education shall, under the direction of the Secretary of the Interior, investigate illiteracy among the adult population of the United States, and the means by which this illiteracy may be eliminated or reduced, and report to Congress, through the Secretary of the Interior, the results of his investigations; and he is hereby authorized, upon request or invitation, to advise and cooperate with school officials, teachers, and others in devising and putting into operation such plans as will give to illiterate men and women and to those of meager education an opportunity to learn to read and write and to supplement and extend their education.

SEC. 2. That in carrying out the provisions of this act the Secretary of the Interior is hereby authorized to use at his discretion for the employment of field and clerical services, and for the payment of necessary expenses, such sums as may be appropriated for this purpose from time to time by Congress or contributed by individuals and societies; and he is hereby authorized to accept donations for this purpose from disinterested individuals and societies, all such donations and the disbursements thereof to be reported by him in his annual report to Congress.

It will be seen that some additional authority is granted in this bill to the Commissioner of Education: He is authorized to advise and cooperate with school officials, teachers, and others in an organized and concerted effort to reduce and as nearly as may be eradicate adult illiteracy in the United States. In this work the Secretary of the Interior is authorized to use for field and clerical services, and for the payment of other expenses, such sums as may be appropriated therefor, and to receive and use contributions from disinterested individuals and societies for such purposes.

There is no appropriation carried by this bill.

It is believed that by a cooperative effort in which the Nation, the States, individuals, and associations shall join, the stain and reproach of illiteracy among the adult population of the country can be almost obliterated.

By an effort of this kind France reduced the number of adult illiterates from 45 in a hundred to 5 in a hundred. In one year over a million men, women, and children over school age were enrolled in those schools, learning to read and write. The schools were organized and supported by national, local, and benevolent cooperation.

According to the Federal census of 1910 there were in the United States 5,516,163 persons 10 years of age and over unable to read or write. This was nearly 8 per cent of such population. There were 3,184,954 illiterate white persons 10 years of age and over unable to read and write, or 5 per cent of such population.

The number of illiterates now in the United States exceeds the total population of the country in 1800.

It ranges from 17 per thousand in Iowa to 290 per thousand in Louisiana. No section can claim exemption from its blight. In the South the percentage is highest in the rural districts. In the North it is highest in the cities. Boston has 24,468 illiterates over 10 years of age.

There are 2,273,603 illiterate males of 21 years of age and over in the United States, enough to determine any national election at any period of our history.

That a country such as the United States should have such a proportion of her population wholly illiterate is a disgrace to the Nation.

That this disgrace can be almost entirely and very quickly eliminated is certain.

Dr. Claxton, Commissioner of the Bureau of Education, said in urging the approval and passage of this bill:

With the authority provided in this bill and an appropriation from Congress for a small group of men and women in the Bureau of Education to plan and direct the work, or even with no appropriation from Congress, it will be possible to obtain the cooperation of the States, counties, districts, and municipalities, and of churches, Sunday schools, women's clubs, and other organizations interested in the public welfare to such an extent that within the next 10 years the percentage of illiteracy in this country may be reduced to a fraction of 1 per cent. I hope the bill may become a law early in the present session of Congress, so we may have plans ready for beginning this work next fall.

Indeed it is not too much to believe that with prompt action on the part of Congress the result expected by the commissioner may be secured by the time the next national census is taken.

Experimental work along this line already made shows that rapid progress is possible. In Rowan County, Ky., through the cooperation

of the people and the teachers of the public schools under the leadership of the county superintendent of schools, Mrs. Stewart, the illiteracy among grown-up men in that county has been reduced in three years from over 13 per cent to practically nothing. Mrs. Stewart wrote the commissioner a short time ago that there were now only six men and women in the county who could not read and write.

The history of that accomplishment is one of the most interesting and hopeful chapters in the records of educational progress in this country.

Mrs. Cora Wilson Stewart, whose name deserves an honored place among American educators, having carefully studied conditions in her county, decided to make an effort to wipe out the stain of illiteracy. She called her teachers together, outlined her plans, and called for volunteers. All the teachers of the county responded. On Labor Day, September 4, 1911, these teachers visited the homes of the people throughout the county, explained the plan, and announced that moonlight schools would be opened the next evening. More than 1,200 men and women, from 18 to 86 years old, were enrolled the first evening. Among these were not only illiterate farmers and their illiterate wives, sons, and daughters, but also illiterate merchants, illiterate ministers, and illiterate lumbermen.

Almost one-third of the population were enrolled, for many besides the illiterates came to add to their meager education received in the inadequate schools of their childhood.

Mrs. Stewart said of the work done in these schools:

Their interest, their zeal, and their enthusiasm were wonderful to witness. It was truly an inspiring sight to see these aged pupils bending over the desks which their children and grandchildren had occupied during the day. Their delight in learning and their pride in their achievements exceeded any joy that I have ever witnessed.

In September, 1912, the number enrolled in the Rowan County schools had risen to 1,600, and the movement had spread to 8 or 10 other counties.

As we have seen, illiteracy in Rowan County, Ky., was eliminated almost entirely in three years. This demonstrates the fact that with proper leadership and under proper direction adult illiteracy is easily and quickly wiped out. Illiteracy is much more easy of eradication than the hookworm or pellagra. The experiment in Kentucky showed that in most cases an adult could learn to read and write in a month. One man, aged 30, after four lessons in the evening school, wrote the superintendent a legible letter. Another man, aged 70, wrote a legible letter after seven nights. A woman, aged 70, wrote a legible letter after eight nights of study. In most cases a few weeks' attendance at the night schools was sufficient to enable the adult pupils to pass over the dark line of illiteracy and into the class of literates.

This experiment conclusively shows that it is possible to bring help to illiterate men and women even under the most adverse circumstances.

If all communities could have the able leadership, the constructive ability, and the healthy cooperation of all the forces used as had Rowan County, Ky., perhaps this legislation might not be needed. But unfortunately in many places where conditions call as loudly for action there is not available the resources necessary for the work.

Especially is it needed to make known in any given locality both by literature and by oral appeal what has been done and what may be done. The national bureau can map out the dark territory and stimulate there a desire for self-help. It can advise as to methods and formulate plans for the campaign. It can receive and distribute funds for the work. Especially is it important that this power be conferred upon the bureau as it has already had offers of contributions which without this legislation it has not power to accept or distribute.

It will be a great accomplishment, entirely feasible, to inaugurate and superintend a movement concerted and nation wide in extent, which will place the United States where it belongs—at the head of the nations of the world in literacy.





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